

He Said, She Said: Differences to Be Admired

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Let's face it: As aggravating and frustrating as they can be, gender differences are also great fun. No, I don't mean that way. I mean that gender differences strike our funny bone. I suppose it has something to do with our past experiences and the vulnerability many of us feel in our personal relationships with the opposite sex. And we are even more vulnerable when it comes to male-female relationships in the workplace.

While it's always risky to generalize about gender differences, it's possible to make certain flexible generalities that can be valuable when communicating across the gender line.

Giving Orders

Men and women often differ in the way they manage people and give orders. Several well-respected studies have shown women tend to soften their demands and statements, whereas men tend to be more direct. Women, for example, use tag lines, phrases like, "don't you think" following the presentation of an idea, "if you don't mind" following a demand or "this may be a crazy idea, but" preceding a suggestion.

Many women are conditioned by culture to maintain harmony in relationships. That conditioning is manifested in softened demands, hedged statements and a generally more tentative communication style. The important thing to remember is that tentative communication does not mean the speaker actually feels tentative or is lacking in confidence. Similarly, more direct communication -- as seen with some men and, because we can't generalize, some women too -- does not mean the person is arrogant, bossy or feels superior. These are nothing more than learned ways of communicating.

Asking Questions

Another difference often seen between men and women is women generally ask more questions than men. We have all heard or experienced the anecdote about the man who refuses to stop to ask directions when lost. We get a good chuckle out of this story, but differences in how and when questions are asked can create real confusion in the workplace.

Asking questions means different things to men and women. Men ask questions for one purpose only: To gather information. For women, asking questions serves two purposes: One is to gather information but, as you've probably noticed, women will also ask questions when they already know the answers. Why? They want to show interest in what the other person has said to cultivate the relationship.

Overcoming Misunderstandings and Misinterpretations

Both management style and asking questions raise fundamental issues about the role of women in the workplace. There is nothing intrinsically wrong with different communication styles. Men are perfectly right to be more direct and ask fewer questions, while women and some men are simply more comfortable with a softer style of communicating. The problem arises when these differences lead to misunderstandings and misinterpretations, which can ultimately disrupt teamwork and even derail someone's chances for upward mobility.

We need to look past our assumptions about the meaning of a particular manner of speaking to build better gender-mixed teams. Just because one person may be more abrupt does not mean he or she is cold, uncaring or uninvolved. On the other hand, a more tentative approach is not necessarily a sign of weakness, fear or lack of confidence. We communicate the way we do, because it is what we are taught. What matters is that we give each other a chance, that we get to know what lies behind the communication style and, most important, that we resist the urge to jump to premature conclusions about the meaning of a particular style.

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